

When neighborhoods need help, call in the college kids!

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Article:

Pair a neighborhood in need of revitalization with a university program interested in partnering with their local community, mix them together, and voila! You've bridged the gap between community and university, right? Actually, it takes more effort than that, as was demonstrated by the Greensboro Parks and Recreation Department Adopt-a-Park Program at Morris A. Farlow Park.

A two-acre tract of land with woods, open space, play equipment, tables, and benches, Morris A. Farlow Park serves more than 5,000 Greensboro, North Carolina, residents. It began as a city-owned facility in 1924, without any specific affiliation. Later, it was named in memory of a former Greensboro police officer shot in the line of duty. The park is located in Glenwood, a working-class neighborhood where children once played among thickets of trees, and families who every year celebrated May Day without fail lived out their entire lives.

But over the years--as suburbia grew and large box stores overtook small neighborhood businesses--this once prosperous neighborhood that was filled with vitality developed a poor reputation. Criminal activity grew. Many long-term residents moved out. And short-term renters and vagrants moved in.

After years of detachment and negative media portrayal, the remaining residents longed for revitalization and a new beginning. The neighborhood association organized a call for action and became the hub of a grassroots movement that soon gained support from the city and the police department. That movement found a solution in spring 2007 with the Adopt-a-Park program, a city-run initiative that pairs hardworking, dedicated, volunteer teams with parks needing tender loving care.

Managing 102 mini and neighborhood parks--along with five regional parks, the Greensboro Parks and Recreation Department chose to use an Adopt-a-Park project model to support neighborhood park cleanliness, maintenance, and revitalization. "When community members take part in something like an Adopt-a-Park project" says Brooks Mullane, the department's program support supervisor, "they feel more connected and have a desire to see it succeed."

That's what happened with the RTH Club, students from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) majoring in recreation, tourism, and hospitality management. Their organization coordinates social events, fundraisers, professional development, and volunteer activities for its members. When they became aware of the revitalization efforts and the park's additional needs, a partnership was born.

Getting Down to Business

Everyone involved in the Morris A. Farlow Park project pitched in to get it going. They participated in planning and promotion, gaining community support, seeking media coverage, and they showed up for park workdays.

The neighborhood association played a prominent role in providing equipment and materials, linking neighborhood resources, and recruiting neighborhood volunteers to work alongside the students. During their monthly meetings, the neighborhood association allotted time to the Adopt-a-Park effort to discuss projects, recruit volunteers, raise questions, and provide updates to the neighborhood as a whole.

The Greensboro Parks and Recreation Department conducted a thorough investigation to identify park projects consistent with neighborhood interests and needs. They also offered valuable resources, knowledge, and experience.

The RTH Club organized workdays, collected necessary horticultural supplies and equipment, and raised financial support from other university students and local community groups.

Volunteers removed trash, cleared bridges of natural debris such as mud and branches, removed graffiti from playground equipment, eliminated overgrowth and invasive plants, cleared fallen tree branches, cleaned the stream that flows through the park, repainted the main park sign, and added perennials at the sign's base. More than 40 volunteers—including neighborhood residents, UNCG students and professors, church groups, and other local community members—participated in the first year of the program, contributing more than 1,000 hours.

A Real Success Story

Few things can compare with seeing the results of hard work. The park revitalization project included the creation of community gardens, a permanent sculpture exhibit, vital neighborhood watch programs, improvements to aging infrastructure, successful yard sales and fundraisers, and unifying anti-crime marches that were covered by the media.

Along with the pleasing visible changes in the park, a number of safety related changes were also noted over the first year of the project. Neighbors could once again see through the park from one side to the other, noticing fewer strangers lurking behind overgrown bushes. Broken glass, spoiled food, and soiled clothing were removed from the park, fostering safer play areas for children and an environment that is more attractive to couples sitting and talking and neighbors walking their dogs. Consequently, the increased visitor activity and the improved appearance of the park discouraged negative elements such as gangs, drugs, and other criminal activities.

The parks and recreation department installed new play equipment, which encourages children to participate in healthy physical activities and play. As a result, neighborhood children who had been long absent are returning to the park. The quality of the stream water changed from a murky white to clear. Residents are showing increased enthusiasm, pride, and confidence in their neighborhood and becoming more involved in neighborhood activities. And the neighborhood is receiving much-needed positive publicity. During one event, an optimistic resident said, "People are going to notice this community gathering. Hopefully, it will bring awareness and get people to want to help our community,"

Volunteers have their own measure of reward, gaining personal satisfaction through the very act of volunteering and by witnessing myriad changes in the park first-hand. "If you can get involved and see the difference it makes, you can feel that satisfaction and say, 'I'm doing something good,'" says one student, who with other university students was provided with continuous and meaningful experiential opportunities. The park project also inspired several participants to change their attitudes about volunteering and about the neighborhood itself, seeing it in a more positive light, with increased knowledge and awareness of neighborly concerns.

Do It Yourself!

The benefits of community-university partnerships, such as this Adopt-a-Park project, are endless: the number of people available to work; the flow of various creative ideas; larger pools of human, social, and economic capital; and bringing together diverse groups with similar desires and common goals. This partnership reflects a genuine commitment to park revitalization and effective pooling of resources.

Other communities can replicate this park project and use it as a collaboration model for change. Plan for its sustainability from the very beginning, incorporate strategies to bridge diverse groups, address partnership concerns beforehand, and share recognition broadly. Although the road may be long, the efforts will be rewarding.

A recent recreation, tourism, and hospitality management graduate from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Sara Poole coordinated this Adopt-a-Park project. She co-authored this article with Brooks Mullane, Stuart J. Schleien, Ph.D., and Kimberly D. Miller, M.S.

Motivate! Collaborate! Celebrate!

These tips will get your revitalization project going and keep it energized through the long slog to the finish line.

Motivate!

- * Offer volunteers incentives such as free food, fun takeaways, media coverage, volunteering hours, and resume-building.
- * Share the successful efforts of previous volunteers, and discuss how new volunteer efforts could be helpful.
- * Provide the tools and supplies that volunteers will need for the project.
- * Organize team-building activities to help volunteers bond, and give them a desire to volunteer again.
- * Present a reward to the group with the most number of volunteers.
- * Arrange for a variety of projects so that volunteers have a sense of being included, making the best use of individual skills, and helping accomplish something important.

Collaborate!

- * Present neighborhood members with information on how improvements in the park could benefit them directly (e.g., Pristine areas increase home values).
- * Encourage volunteers to spread the word to their friends and neighbors.
- * Facilitate active and ongoing communication between all partners and groups.
- * Invite media to cover your events so that others see what is being accomplished.
- * Get excited! Project leaders act as motivators and give impressions of what partners should expect from the project. Expect nothing short of greatness!
- * Attend neighborhood/town meetings to demonstrate your support of the community, solicit their suggestions, and gain their support.

Celebrate!

- * Praise volunteers for jobs well done while they're doing them.
- * Encourage individuality and creativity among the volunteers to complete tasks.
- * Hold a gathering to celebrate the many accomplishments throughout the project: potluck dinners, pizza parties, and popsicles and snow cones during warm workdays.
- * Remind volunteers of the powerful difference they are making.